

Norwalk-Like Virus at Home

What is it and how do people get infected?

Viral gastroenteritis, often referred to as "winter vomiting disease" or "stomach flu", is a common illness. It should not be confused with influenza which is commonly referred to as the "flu". Influenza virus causes an illness with symptoms like cough and sore throat, fever, muscle aches, headaches and tiredness and lasts 3-5 days. The "winter vomiting disease" or stomach flu" is commonly caused by Norwalk-like viruses (NLV). The main source of the virus is stool and vomit from infected persons. The virus can be spread from person-to-person on unwashed hands. The virus can also be spread by food, water or ice that has been handled by a sick person. Vomiting may spread the virus through the air. The virus can survive on surfaces such as countertops or sink taps for a long time.



What are the symptoms and is treatment available and how do I avoid getting this disease?

The main symptoms are sudden onset of nausea, cramping, chills and fever. Usually vomiting and/or diarrhea are also present. Symptoms generally last between one to three days. Fluid loss can be a serious problem for the elderly or very young. Drinking lots of clear fluids while ill is important. If diarrhea or vomiting lasts more than two to three days see a doctor.

There is no vaccine or medicine that can prevent NLV. Also there are different types of NLV so people who have had it once can get NLV again. The key to reducing person-to-person spread of NLV is hand hygiene prior to eating, drinking, smoking etc. and after using the bathroom. If hands are soiled, proper hand hygiene requires warm running water, soap and rubbing hands together for about 15 seconds. Frequent use of alcohol hand sanitizers with 60-90% alcohol is also effective against NLV.

What should I do?

Clean up at once and disinfect the house by cleaning the floors, counters and furniture with a dilute bleach solution daily or more frequently. Visitors should be asked to stay away while people are sick. If only one person is sick, other family members may become sick after 24-48 hours. The sick person should try to keep his or her own room and have little contact with other people. If possible, dedicate a bathroom to this person while they are ill.

Remember frequent hand hygiene!

Clean up using hot water and detergent. Surfaces should be wiped down with a dilute bleach solution (at least 1 part household bleach to 9 parts water) to kill the virus. Discard any food used by the ill person and any food that could have been exposed to them. Dishes or utensils should be washed in a dishwasher (preferred) or with hot water and detergent. Laundry should also be washed in hot water and detergent. Bathrooms and toilet areas need special care. They should be cleaned often with the dilute bleach solution (at least 1 part household bleach to 9 parts water). Household cleaners other than bleach are not effective.

Cleaning vomit, feces & the house

Wear disposable gloves if possible. Use paper towels to soak up excess liquid. Put these directly into garbage bags. Clean soiled area with detergent and hot water. Don't use a cleaning cloth or a sponge as this can lead to further spread. Wipe area with freshly made bleach solution. Dispose of cleaning cloths, gloves into garbage. Wash hands. Clean bathrooms and any touched areas with bleach solution. Don't share towels.

Anyone who is vomiting and/or has diarrhea should, where possible, avoid the following activities until the symptoms are over: attending schools or child care facilities, visiting friends and relatives in seniors' residences, continuing care facilities or hospitals, and preparing food for others.

Reference: adapted from BC Centre for Disease Control